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SUBJECT: ELECTION NO THREAT TO FOL IN MANTA

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1. (SBU) Summary: A pre-electoral visit to the city of Manta and Manabi provincial capital Portoviejo confirmed that the incumbent mayor of Manta, who has been largely supportive of the USG presence at the Forward Operating Location (FOL), is likely to be re-elected in local elections on October 17. Regardless, a variety of local and provincial officials, and other electoral observers confirmed that the USG-maintained FOL for counter-narcotics operations located on the Ecuadorian Air Force Base in Manta is not a campaign issue; the base enjoys broad support at the local level for its positive economic effects on the region. End Summary.

Background Information

2. (U) PolCouns visited Manta and Portoviejo, in Manabi province, for meetings with local election officials, party officials, FOL commander, and independent electoral observer on September 23-24. Manta is the second-largest city and recently-booming commercial hub of largely rural, agricultural Manabi province. Manabi has a total of 914,841 eligible voters (11% of the national total) who will visit 3,112 voting stations on October 17 to select a provincial prefect (U.S. governor-equivalent), and from among 22 mayors (19 of whom are seeking re-election), six provincial councilors, 95 municipal councilors and 53 rural councils representing 185,175 rural voters. Manta is Ecuador's second-largest Pacific port, after Guayaquil. Manta's seaside location makes its port operations substantially cheaper than Guayaquil, causing economic competition and some recent political strains.

3. (SBU) Manta has experienced an economic boom since the GoE agreed in 1999 to host the USG-maintained FOL at Manta airport. The city boasts has 131,166 eligible voters (second only to provincial capital Portoviejo, located 30 km. inland) which will be distributed among 465 voting stations. Political power in Manabi is divided between the Social Christian Party (PSC), which currently controls three of seven Congressional seats and 11 of 22 municipal mayors, including Manta's; the National Action Institutional Renewal Party (PRIAN), with two Congressional seats; and the Ecuadorian Roldosista Party (PRE), which currently controls the provincial prefect and 5 mayors. The Popular Democracy Party (DP) has 3 mayors and the last of Manabi's seven seats in the national Congress. PRIAN presidential candidate Alvaro Noboa swept Manabi (with 375,052 votes to Gutierrez' 180,895) in the second round of the 2002 presidential election. Gutierrez' ruling Patriotic Society Party (PSP) is represented in Manabi by Governor Virginia Garcia. Garcia, who took office in June, is Gutierrez' fourth appointee to the post; a previous appointee, Cesar Fernandez, is currently on trial for his alleged involvement in narco-trafficking. Garcia told PolCouns the PSP has hopes to win the prefect race and the Portoviejo mayorship.

Electoral Preparation and Other Concerns

4. (SBU) Kausman Quinonez, President of the Manabi Provincial Electoral Tribunal (representing the PSC), told PolCouns on September 24 that arrangements for the elections were proceeding smoothly after initial glitches due to low participation rates by younger prospective poll workers. New lists of poll workers targeting more stable professionals had recently been received from the national Supreme Electoral Tribunal. Most of the newly-named poll workers will receive training by October 2, he said. (SepTel reports on nationwide training of poll workers.)

5. (SBU) Jacqueline Terranova de Batallas, provincial coordinator for electoral watchdog NGO Citizen Participation, said local elections are traditionally not violent and she does not expect violence on election day. Voters remain largely apathetic about the elections. However, she reported one violent incident which took place in the pre-campaign period in Portoviejo in August, when a political party worker was injured in a fight with rivals.

6. (SBU) Terranova was more concerned about misuse of public funds for campaign purposes. She provided photographic evidence (Manta municipal vehicles and earth-moving machines sporting campaign material and bumper-stickers in favor of

the mayor's candidacy) and her public declarations and formal complaints against it. She dismissed as unfounded accusations from a rival politician against Zambrano for using municipal resources to work on his personal property. She put a recent challenge from a rival candidate about Zambrano's Mexican university credential in the same category. Press reported on September 24 that PRE Congressional deputy Mario Coello, alleged (without presenting proof) that several municipal councilors in Manta are implicated in drug trafficking. According to Terranova, most candidates have been reluctant to reveal their sources and amounts of financing. Citizens Participation will field 90 observers throughout the province on election day.

Incumbents Hopeful, but not Secure

17. (SBU) Congressional deputy Simon Bustamante (PSC) said he was perplexed why the PRIAN was so weak in Manabi after Alvaro Noboa's strong local showing in the second round of the presidential race in 2002. The reason, he believed, was a combination of neglect and tactical errors by the PRIAN since then. Noboa was expected to campaign in Portoviejo on September 26, but, according to Bustamante, had largely abandoned the province to the PSC and PRE. Meanwhile, the PSC is confident it may pick up two more mayorships in upcoming elections, bringing its total to 13 of 22. Manta mayor Jorge Zambrano is certain to be re-elected, he said. (Most people PolCouns consulted, including in informal street polling, said the same.) Zambrano, seeking a third term, is credited with initiating (but not completing) major public works projects, including a new highway from the airport to the port and a major waterfront facelift.

18. (SBU) Terranova, however, cited a recent media poll showing Jose (Tucho) Velasquez of the Popular Democracy Party (DP), leading the race, followed by PRE candidate Ricardo Bowin, with Zambrano trailing in third. She claimed that criticism of Zambrano for misuse of public funds was having an effect.

19. (SBU) Provincial prefect Humberto Guillen (PRE) is also expected by many to gain re-election. Bustamante and Quinonez, however, boosted the chances of PSC challenger Mariano Zambrano (no relation to the Manta mayor), claiming recent private polls revealed Zambrano taking a lead of two points and Guillen falling dramatically. Governor Garcia claimed the PSP candidate, Patricia Briones de Poggi, has a real chance of winning the prefecture. Others predicted that the PSP would not win one elected position in the province.

FOL Not An Issue

10. (SBU) All individuals consulted by PolCouns concurred that, to their knowledge, the issue of a U.S. presence at the FOL is neither unpopular nor a live political issue locally. Critics of the FOL at the national level are motivated by ideological concerns, they said; those critics are largely absent at the local level.

11. (SBU) Bustamante credited the USG presence with Manta's recent commercial development. The new highway linking the airport with the maritime port will further strengthen Manta as a regional rival to Guayaquil. The expanded runway and facilities at the airport have also raised hopes for international designation. The FOL Commander confirmed that FOL fire-fighting capability will soon allow the airport to meet ICAO standards for an international airport.

12. (SBU) Quinonez said the FOL was not an electoral issue in Manabi and suggested that the current air of mystery surrounding the FOL works in USG interests. Local people do not have direct access to the FOL, and assume that FOL personnel and vehicles may be monitoring local narco-activity. This uncertainty acts as a brake on criminal activity in the area, he suggested. For that reason, Quinonez recommended that the FOL not take actions to demystify its presence by opening the FOL to public events.

Comment

13. (SBU) It was encouraging to hear the strong level of support among local officials and others for the FOL presence and its positive spin-off effects on the region, although the FOL remains a live national political issue which we will review SepTel. Given this situation, prospects are good for continued cooperation and local support for the FOL. More generally, the situation in Manabi will test PSC strength in its coastal heartland.

KENNEY